

THE HEALING BUDDHA. By Raoul Birnbaum. Published by Shambhala Books, Boulder; Rider and Co., London, 1979; 253 pp., with bibliography and index.

This book deals with Buddhism regarded as a system of healing, which essentially has always been the aim and purpose of Buddhism. The author to some extent emphasizes its application to the treatment of physical ailments, though not to the neglect of the basic Buddhist emphasis on the psychodynamic causes of disease in their widest sense.

The book is divided into two parts. In the first the author gives a general review of the theory and development of the ritual procedures used to promote healing in Buddhism. In the second part he gives translations of important scriptures describing Healing Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. Three sutras have been translated in full, also excerpts from a number of others, mostly from the Chinese. As far as the author knows, none of the principal texts has previously appeared in complete translation in any Western language. Included here are: Sutra on the Contemplation of the Two Bodhisattvas, King of Healing and Supreme Healer (from Chinese), Sutra on the Merits of the Fundamental Vows of the Master of Healing, the Lapis Lazuli Radiance Tathagata (from Chinese, with references to the Sanskrit version), and the Sutra on the Merits of the Fundamental Vows of the Seven Masters of Healing, the Lapis Lazuli Radiance Buddhas (from Chinese).

The Buddha was undoubtedly a peerless physician. This tends to be overlooked as somehow a physician is usually regarded as being largely occupied with treating physical ailments. However, the Buddha recognised that the fatal malady called Dukkha affecting all sentient beings, essentially has a mental basis. Dukkha is a wide term covering all forms of suffering and discomfort. Avijja or Ignorance and Tanha or Craving are the root causes of this disease. The diagnosis is not difficult for the expert physician or psychiatrist. But he has an extremely difficult task to convince the "patient" that he is really ill.

However, the ordinary individual is much more receptive to the need for the healing of bodily ills. Because of this in the texts quoted there is a certain emphasis put on the Buddha as a healer of physical illness, from which to approach the basic pathological condition of the patient which is really a mental one. Dr. Birnbaum mentions a number of ritual procedures to aid the healing process.

Two Bodhisattva brothers, the King of Healing and the Supreme Healer, can be found in a wide range of Mahayana texts. Sometimes they merely listen to the Buddha's teachings. At other times they ask questions as representatives of the assembly. Or again they are central figures in the healing process. The author gives some examples of their mode of behaviour from the texts.

The King of Healing is prominent in the Lotus Sutra, a key text in the tradi-

tions of the Buddhist healing deities. The two Bodhisattva brothers are also prominent in the Suramgama Sutra. Here it is made clear according to the traditions of this sutra that the two Bodhisattvas were originally accomplished physicians. They had studied the properties of a multitude of different substances likely to be of therapeutic value drawn from plants, trees, metals, and stones. Said by them to amount to 108,000 in all! Arising out of this they stated that they achieved their spiritual awakening through an analysis of the causes of taste. This awakening was certified by the Buddha.

As Dr. Birnbaum says, divine beings lie beyond the bounds of human comprehension. Images crystallize this into a more readily comprehensible form. The deity may communicate with the devotee by means of revealing a mental image to retain and cherish. But this communication can work in the opposite direction; by visualizing the image of the revealed form (based on physical images and traditional recorded descriptions) the devotee may enter into profound rapport with the deity.

The author emphasizes the importance of the gemstone lapis lazuli in making devotional images. Its chief component is the blue mineral lazulite containing myriads of tiny flecks of gold colored pyrite which resembles the sapphire blue sky aglow with myriads of stars. This stone was highly prized in antiquity.

From the Bhaisajya-guru sutras, the Celestial Assembly of the Buddha of Healing is described. In viewing this august assemblage of spiritual aristocracy, one's eyes are involuntarily drawn to the centre where the Master of Healing shimmers with the intense blue rays of lapis lazuli. This becomes the symbolic locus of his spiritual force. To either side of the Buddha are his chief Bodhisattvas called All-Pervading Solar Radiance and All-Pervading Lunar Radiance, the two luminaries. The association of the sun and moon with the Buddha of Healing finds its culmination in the formation of the Assembly, but references leading up to this association are found in chapter thirteen of the Vimalakirtinirdesa Sutra where a young prince named Lunar Canopy became a fervent disciple of the King of Healing Buddha of that time. In the sutra termed the Contemplation of the Two Bodhisattvas, King of Healing and Supreme Healer, the monk who initiated the two physicians in a past life, related by Sakyamuni, was named Solar Womb.

Observing the names of various participants in tales centered in the Buddhist healing deities, references to cosmic attributes such as sun, moon, constellations, frequently occur.

Further we find the Twelve Yaksa Generals grouped below the Buddha and Bodhisattvas in the assembly. These may be specially related to the twelve astrological houses and the twelve two-hour time periods of the day.

Thus in the Celestial Assembly of the Buddha of Healing, with the two luminaries and the sky filled with stars, also the twelve astrological houses, we have

an image of time and space in harmony. This is clearly related to healing, as to feel well it is necessary to feel in harmony with the environment. To be in supreme harmony would imply a state of cosmic consciousness.

Turning again to the center figure of the assembly, the Master of Healing, we see in his hands the symbols of his healing function the lapis lazuli bowl of amrit and the myrobalan fruit (Latin: *Terminalia chebula*), a small astringent fruit with healing properties.

The myrobalan is also used in early Mahayana texts as a symbol of "the creative power of thought which it is claimed in high levels of concentration can materialize objects in the manner of the myrobalan berry concretized on the palm of the hand. Thus it is supposed to symbolize the materialization of the will of the Buddha bringing blessings from unseen realms, like the healing energy beamed upon devotees in their worship.

Dr. Birnbaum goes on to describe a number of complicated mandala rites for the invocation of the Buddha of Healing, also dharanis to be recited. These procedures are all methods of deepening the faith of the worshippers in the series of tremendous vows made by the Bodhisattvas on solemn occasions.

Aside from the spontaneous faith of the worshippers, the efficacy of these rites depends on the officiator possessing the genuine spiritual tradition. Unless a dharani is transmitted to an aspirant by a spiritual teacher who is himself enlightened, it is hardly likely to have much effect. Unfortunately the original transmission has frequently been lost. As the author says, in order to be healed, it is necessary to do more than construct an image either physically or mentally: the image must become alive with the spiritual force of the Buddha and merge with the worshipper so that he becomes fully identified with the Healing Buddha.

While this is a sound conception of the healing process, in practice this is a rather tall order and the necessary power to actualize the transformation is hardly likely to be evoked without the mediation of a competent guru. This aspect of the dynamics of the healing process really needs to be stated more clearly by the author.

In the appendix there is an interesting list of medicaments sanctioned by Sakyamuni Buddha for the use of monks. Some of the medicines would not appear to be very palatable and are scarcely likely to become habit forming.

The book contains a very full bibliography and index.

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